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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000217

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR D, SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, DS;
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: President sets parliamentary elections for April 2; Tigers reiterate support for ceasefire

Refs: (A) Colombo - Ops Center 02/07-09/04 telecons

- (B) Colombo 198, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Late February 7, President Kumaratunga dissolved Parliament and called early general elections for April 2. The GSL remains in place, but is now a "caretaker" government and there may be some large-scale ministerial changes at the President's request. Sri Lanka's political parties are gearing up for what many expect will be a hard fought, violent campaign. The Tamil Tigers have called the President's decision "a grave setback" for the peace process, but have reiterated support for the ceasefire and peace. The elections are expected to delay any possible restarting of GSL-LTTE negotiations for another several months. Mission believes that the February 17 meeting of Tokyo process co-chairs should go ahead. Septels contain reports on media play and Mission's EAC meeting. END SUMMARY.

President Calls Elections

2. (SBU) President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga dissolved Sri Lanka's Parliament late February 7 and called for general elections to take place on April 2. The elections are several years early (the current Parliament was seated in December 2001 and its five-year term was set to end December 2006). The President's "gazette" order was formally delivered to the government printing office in Colombo just before midnight on February 7 where it was printed and thus brought into effect. The printing office was surrounded by police during this process to ensure that there were no problems and there were not. In fact, since the President's action, there have been no reports of political violence or other turbulence in the country. All in all, Sri Lankans seem to have been taking the situation in stride so far. This is understandable inasmuch as the calling of elections has been mooted as a very real possibility since the cohabitation impasse between the President and the Prime Minister began in November 2003 (see Ref B).

3. (SBU) (Note: There had been talk that Provincial Council, "PC," elections might be held the same day in April as parliamentary elections if the latter were called. It now appears that the PC elections will take place at some point after the parliamentary elections, perhaps in a staggered fashion.)

GSL is now "Caretaker" Government

4. (SBU) With the calling of elections, the Sri Lankan government (GSL) remains in place, with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Foreign Minister Tyronne Fernando, and Finance Minister K.N. Choksy, for example, remaining in their positions. The GSL, however, is now formally a "caretaker" government, waiting until a new government is formed to take its place after the April elections. There are reports that the President is pressing the PM to make large-scale ministerial changes. Already, on February 7, Kumaratunga had sworn in two new ministers: former foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was named Minister of Information and Media, and senior Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP, the President's party) MP D.M. Jayaratne was named Minister of Posts and Mass Communication. (Note: At this time, the Defense Ministry remains in the hands of the President. How to allocate this ministry's key functions was the focus of the cohabitation impasse, which included months of now-cancelled discussions between the two sides.) Kumaratunga, in the meantime, is also reportedly

pressing the PM to take immediate steps to cut down on the number of ministers and deputy ministers in his government to a total of 15 (down from the current 60-plus).

Parties Gear Up for Campaign

15. (C) Sri Lanka's political parties are gearing up for what many expect will be a hard fought, violent campaign. (Note: Over 50 people died in the last parliamentary election campaign in December 2001.) In a February 8 conversation with Ambassador Lunstead, Bradman Weerakoon, the PM's Secretary, related that the PM and key aides were in a "war-room" meeting discussing the coming campaign. (In reaction to the news, the PM has canceled his planned February 9-11 visit to Thailand.) In a February 9 conversation with Polchief, Malik Samarawickrama, the chief of the PM's United National Party (UNP), reported that he was in touch with the party's organizers and financial backers. He said the UNP was ready with a "war chest" of USD 5.0 million and he estimated that elections would cost the government USD 8.0 million to hold.

16. (SBU) As the UNP reviews next steps, its allies in its "United National Front" (UNF), including the tea estate Tamil Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), are also meeting and making plans. The SLFP and the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), newly allied in the "United People's Freedom Alliance" (UPFA), are also holding meetings. The key issue that all the parties are focused on in the near-term is the drawing up of candidate nomination lists which must be submitted to the Elections Commissioner between February 17-24. (Note: Septel will detail Sri Lanka's election process and procedures.) For the UNF and the UPFA coalitions this process involves hours of hard bargaining and compromises. While the SLFP-JVP linkup seems strong at this time, the UNP still has to confirm that its coalition partners like the CWC and the SLMC are still on board and willing to form joint electoral tickets as necessary.

LTTE Reiterates Support for Ceasefire

17. (SBU) The pro-Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) website "TamilNet" has been reporting on the situation in the south in a largely factual manner. There has been one key thread of commentary, however, and that emerged from Anton Balasingham, the group's London-based spokesman. Balasingham was quoted on TamilNet as making the following comments that are at once sharply critical about the situation in the south but reassuring about the LTTE's continued commitment to the peace track:

"The dissolution of the Sri Lankan parliament and the call for a snap election constitutes a grave setback to the peace process. The decision to seek another mandate from the people clearly demonstrates the fact that the Sinhala political leadership lacks the political will and vision to resolve the country's burning issue -- the Tamil national question. The irrational power struggle and the lack of consensus among the Sinhala ruling elites on the resolution of the ethnic conflict have plunged the entire country into serious political instability and endangers the prospects of peace and security of the Tamil people. The LTTE leadership has amply demonstrated to the world their sincere dedication and commitment to peace and peaceful resolution of the conflict. In spite of the political turmoil and uncertainty in Colombo, our liberation organization will rigidly observe the ceasefire regulations and maintain peace. Since the decision to call for elections might further delay the resumption of the peace talks, we call upon the international community to take immediate measures to assist the Tamil people faced with urgent humanitarian needs.

At this critical juncture we call upon the Sinhala masses to express their solid support to those forces who recognize the legitimate rights and aspirations of the Tamil people and are seriously committed to peace and peaceful resolution of the Tamil ethnic conflict. It is the majority Sinhala people who has the final choice in the forthcoming elections to decide as to co-exist with the Tamils in peace, harmony and prosperity or compel them to seek the path of political independence on the basis of their right to self-determination."

18. (C) LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran and Political Chief S.P. Thamilselvan have not been quoted by TamilNet on the situation as of yet. Thamilselvan is now in Europe and expected to return to Sri Lanka on February 14. In other Tamil-related developments, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the generally pro-LTTE group that represents about 16 MPs, has come out foursquare against the President's action. Senior TNA MP R. Sampathan was quoted as stating that the election would only lead to more "confusion" in the south about policy toward the peace process. In a February 7 conversation, A. Chandranee, a TNA MP, told polchief that he worried that the JVP would gain more seats in the election and would work to derail the peace process.

COMMENT

19. (C) As touched on in Balasingham's comments, the big downside of the elections is that they are expected to delay any possible restarting of GSL-LTTE negotiations for another several months. (Note: The talks have been on hold since the Tigers pulled out of the negotiating track in April 2003. The group indicated that it was willing to restart talks late last year, but the November 2003 cohabitation crisis intervened.) It is not immediately apparent why Kumaratunga chose to go for elections at this time, especially since it appeared that the "Mano-Malik" talks were on the verge of reaching agreement on a mechanism for sharing defense powers. Elections will be expensive and probably violent, and may well not result in much political clarity. It appears that the President threw in her lot over the weekend with hard-liners in her party and in the JVP, who have been pressing for elections for months now. Indian High Commissioner Sen told the Ambassador that in his estimation the President was swayed by these elements, which want, he said, "the immediate prospect of power." It is not clear why the SLFP-JVP thinks it can win elections; most observers believe, at this time, that there will be a real dogfight that will most likely result in a hung Parliament.

10. (C) Mission believes that the February 17 meeting of Tokyo process co-chairs should go ahead. The meeting would serve, in our view, as a very useful forum to urge that the elections be peaceful, to reiterate the international community's support for the peace process and a timely resumption of peace talks, and to highlight the need for assistance to all areas. Mission will be providing further thoughts regarding the February 17 meeting shortly. END COMMENT.

11. (U) Minimize considered.

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